The Claus-Rosen Bridge

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THIS EDITION (2024) PUBLISHED BY THE CHESHIRE HOUSE

FIRST EDITION (2023) PUBLISHED BY ARCBEATLE PRESS

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1.
The Old Man and the Rabbit

Lotto sat on his armchair, his rabbit Mae in his lap, both half asleep. This was how some of their best days often began. Wrapped in each other's arms, pondering on the mysteries of the Universe.

Stroking Mae, Lotto recalled earlier lives. First he saw himself garbed in black and orange as he graduated Cahlough Academy. That wasn't the beginning, but it *was* how it had all started. Not on the Morning Star proper, of course, merely one of its doppelganger worlds; the Cosmic War had already been in full swing by this time. Then there were other, stranger, better lives. He'd had many — this body was his sixth — and he had dedicated them to investigating curiosities around the Universe, as well as aiding the needy. The majority of this time was spent as a humanoid, but at one point during the Cosmic War, his superiors had granted him the body of a dog, from which he had then become an anthropomorphic lioness, and then his current body.

Sometimes, whilst he slept, Lotto dreamt of an earlier life still. His first, he believed. He had been a simple, mortal musician then, a human, living on Old Earth. A life without the Archons & their politics looming over him, and — he hoped — a life with *friends*. Yet there was little of this prior life he remembered, human or Archon. Memories of it came easier during sleep, but the details of these dreams were ever-changing. In some dreams he could vividly see his former self or, in his eyes, a version of himself he wanted to be. In others, he would find details blurring and fading, as if he was losing another memory right then and there. On nights like that, there was little solace found in the embrace of sleep. He couldn't even recall what he'd been *called* back then — he'd taken the name "Lotto" during his time at Cahlough.

Who had he *been*? His ignorance bothered him. And it was not an issue he took lying down. In sleep, he remembered; but in his waking hours, when he had time — he *searched*.

When he woke up from one of his little naps, Lotto made a simple decision. He was tired of searching the Universe for fragments of lore; it was time, he thought, to widen the bounds. He would scour the edges of the Cosmos, and locate someone who knew a way Outside, to the island-universes he'd heard whispered of over the centuries, the constellations of realities which supposedly orbited the main universe. There was knowledge there, they said, which had been banished from the inner universe; copies of records, the ghosts of dissipated memories.

So, getting dressed in a blue-grey trench coat & purple scarf, Lotto picked up his walking stick, turned round a corner of his apartment — and then, as always, there was a brief period where he felt as if he was soaring through the Tourbillon – as if he was being hurled back and forth across time to build up speed – then *catapulted* through the aeons.

Soon he landed on the planet Hathor, Mae at his side.

They'd been here before; it certainly wasn't the edge of the universe, just the first place Lotto and Mae had thought of which was also decidedly very far from Lotto's home base. A good place to touch down on the way to the end of everything. And it had rocks, large angular ones, offering a plethora of corners. Mae's power of translocation was reliant upon them: Lotto must walk *around* a corner for the inter-temporal slingshot manoeuvre to begin. They weren't here for sight-seeing, but as they made their way to the nearest boulder, Mae happened to look up at the sky — and observe that there was no moon. *I wonder how the tides work here.*

Looking ahead at Lotto again, Mae saw they'd reached the rock, and put it out of her mind.

Again they passed through the Tourbillon, and then they were on a frozen, rocky wasteland. They could hear unseen waves crashing up against the high wall which dominated the horizons, stretching endlessly across the wasteland. It was dotted with statues, which stood with their backs to the wall as though supporting it with their own strength. The stony likenesses of people who had

once been of grave importance to the defunct Lords of the Universe, the *arch'ur-lucifers*. One of the grey colossi wore spiny combat boots, another wore white ceremonial robes and held a spanner — and a third held a Shambler in its lifeless grip.

His investigative qualities taking charge as always, Lotto looked closely at the latter — first he looked down at the foot of the statue, to discern the identity of this strange warrior, and saw the name *Kopyion Liall a Mahajetsu* inscribed into the stone. The name had a strange pattern to it, unlike the naming conventions of the modern age; and he didn't recall any mention of a Kopyion from his days at Cahlough — he'd long ago discovered just how lacking its history curriculum had really been, of course. He gazed for a moment at the stony face, then took a closer look up at the Shambler in his grasp — and jumped back in disgust. It wasn't a model — *that was an actual Shambler*.

A lesser one, trapped, bounded in form, but the sight still made him shudder. The Shamblers from the Stars — known alternatively as the "Star Vampires", or when viewed (many argued more correctly) as a collective, the Yssgaroth – had been one of his people's greatest foes during their protohistory. It was said that they had constructed their own history in opposition to the Archons', spun their own spiralling universe off from that same raw material from which Urizen wrought Creation — and then collided again with the Archons' dimension, and gone to war, for reasons lost to time.

The Star Vampires' realm had many names — some mythical and foreboding, others astonishingly prosaic. Though Lotto didn't know it, an Archon technician, one of the few survivors & a member of the Mathematical Bureau, had recently dubbed it 'Universe #2', which was *almost* correct for reasons whose significance wholly eluded the stopped clocks of the Bureau. One thing, however, was certain: they were meant to be sealed there, unable to intrude again into the Archons' domain. If he could beheld one of the wretched things now — then he was on the right path.

There was one statue which wasn't holding *up* the wall, as the others did; but rather was sitting in a sun-disk, just barely touching the wall, and either holding

together two cracks, or causing them. Lotto had never been the most devout student of religious iconography, but it wasn't difficult to recognise Urizen, the Lord Founder — a naked, bearded man like a Greek Titan, almost beautiful, yet hideous — his whole being contorted with effort.

Lotto looked away from the wall, warding off his unending awe of it. In the instance, he glimpsed a small hut. The best place to go, he reasoned: if someone had chosen to live here at the edge of the universe, they'd be the most likely to understand its mechanics. Hearing his thoughts, Mae led the way.

Then, at last, it began to sink in. They were actually *at* the edge of the universe. Already? To begin with, Lotto wasn't certain that such a place could even logically *exist* — although logic had, admittedly, recently gone out of fashion — but even if it did, he shouldn't have gotten here so easily…

As the house grew nearer, a small light appeared in the window, and then an old man on a rocking chair was outside on the patio.

Mae, now in the form of an elderly cat, walked up to the old man and sat on his lap, purring.

Lotto, slightly embarrassed, spoke in a reverent tone.

"Greetings, dweller at the edge. I am the Archon Lotto — an investigator, a wanderer, and most important of all at the present time, a *pursuer of knowledge*. Know ye the wisdom found without the bounds of the Anchored Cosmos, on the island-universes?"

In truth, he disliked how the portentous words felt on his tongue, but he felt a sense of power was called for.

The old man peered up at Lotto, a look of achievement and apprehension swimming over his face.

"Knowledge? Ahh. Then it's the Library you want. The Endless Library; the Library of the Plume Coteries, accessible by legal means via the Cosmic Gate. But you're an Archon, and your heart…" The old man reached out, almost, but

not quite, pressing a hand against Lotto's chest. "Your *cœur de lumière*… How interesting. Your only heart, it would seem, and you've had it removed… Hmm. Yes. If that is what you are —" He gestured up at the mountainous wall, behind which the "ocean" could still be heard crashing. "— then take a boat out across the Great Black Void, leave the Bellbreaker's Cradle behind you entirely, and enter in by the Void Gate. This way, the Head Receptionist won't question your lack of a heart. Just say you're fleeing from a universe where the Gods defeated the Archons, rather than admitting to them that such an event transpired in their home universe. We mustn't give away the ending."

Lotto nodded, bowed in gratefulness, and began to walk from the cottage. Mae jumped off the old man's lap and started strolling away, before turning around. For just a moment, and quite without warning, she was a girl, young and scruffy, looking at him in askance.

"Wait!" the girl hailed him. "What book should we look for? The library's awful big, surely there's an unending amount of nonsense there."

The old man stroked his beard. "*Touché.* I'd recommend *The Book of Christmas.* Good read, surprisingly enlightening. Bit funny in the middle, though. Think the author might've been… a little self-involved, to say the least."

He winked, as if there was some kind of hidden joke there.

Mildly perplexed, but still determined to discover this forbidden knowledge, Lotto *tsk-tsk*'d Mae to come over, and they walked back to the Wall again. Taking pains to climb *well* clear of the living Shambler, Lotto picked Mae — now a snake — up, and put her around his neck. She tightened her coil, enough to get a good grip, but not enough to hurt him.

Using his walking stick to pull himself up, Lotto climbed higher and higher, until he could *see* out beyond the cliff and into the Great Black Void. A vessel resembling an Old Earth sailing ship stood just Outside — afloat on that non-substance which could, metaphorically, be described as the Great Ocean Around the Cosmos, or the void-between-worlds. Pulling himself up onto the ship, Lotto sat down whilst Mae took the wheel, guiding the ship away from the

Bellbreaker's Cradle. Soon, not even the wall marking the edge of the universe could be seen, and all but the ship was blackness.

This did all seem… overly convenient. Sitting in the captain's lodge as they continued sailing, Lotto suddenly realised how absurd it was that he hadn't questioned why there was an old man, or a house, at the supposed edge of the universe. Or why there had been a ship sitting just where they needed it… If he'd had a heart, he'd have said he felt by it that this was some sort of trap. And yet — why would somebody set a trap in the Library? More importantly, how would they ever get away with it?

Suddenly, and very unexpectedly, the horizon appeared all around them, and they found themselves sitting at a table. The table was crowded over with cups and teapots, and a peculiar pair of beings were sitting there with Lotto and Mae. One was a little man with an aquiline nose and an extraordinary hat; the other was a scruffy-looking rodent. Lotto and Mae had never met them before, but knew them at once for who they were.

"Uh…What's happening?" asked Lotto, perplexed.

"Why," one of them replied, "we're waiting for Alice, of course! Pass the tea, Dormouse."

"Haigha," the Mad Hatter lectured — pronouncing the name with such affectation that it took a moment for Lotto to parse it as *Hare* — "you know perfectly well you don't know perfectly well who these people are, Alices sideways-mind!"

Mae was currently in mouse form; she passed the tea as instructed, but then wasted no time in walking away down the road, quickly followed by Lotto.

"They're both *quite* mad, you know," commented a wide-grinned cat.

Turning a corner, the pair reappeared back on the interdimensional sailing boat.

"...What was that, Mae?" asked Lotto.

Mae looked up at him, as if he weren't the brightest. Sounds of mad tea parties getting quieter, Lotto finally got the gist. That had been Wonderland without a doubt — and what could Wonderland be, save one of those many "asteroid universes"? They must be passing through one of the Great Rings.

Walking back down to the captain's cabin, Lotto found a book entitled *The Cosmography of the Bellbreaker's Cradle and the Related Worlds Thereof* which, in addition to using the term '*multiversum oppidanus*' to refer to both a 'Big Bauble' and the collection of 'satellite worlds' around it, described in detail how these 'satellite worlds' worked. It was heavy reading, and contained a laundry list of dream-lands, a directory of dimensions, a repertoire of hells and afterlives; in places the book seemed at war with itself, unable to decide if a "satellite world" and a "non-world" were the same kind of thing. He almost gave up when he noted the entry on the heartland of the House of the Fallen, which spoke of it as a 'non-world' which had perhaps been part of an 'astral plane', but was now *within* a 'mathematical shadow dimension', *itself* resting in a somewhat-defunct timeline. If he'd been fond of that kind of talk, he'd have remained at the Academy.

Whilst Lotto read, the ship was carried along a particularly powerful current of alter-reality, narrowly avoiding the Deep Darkness, and *just* being caught by the existential pull of a junkyard-universe, sending the sailors back toward the Bellbreaker's Cradle. Mae, still steering by herself, used her innate skill of navigation with respect to peculiar natures of reality to try and reach for the location of the Void Gate, which she presumed would feel like a pocket of reality among a sea of unreality.

Mae let out a shrill sound — it was hard to tell which animal she'd become at the moment; it was dark, and the noises blended together. Lotto nodded.

"Yes, you're right," he said with a confident warmth. "One foot in front of the other. I'm sure it'll make sense soon…"

His finger tapped the head of his cane, certainly hoping he'd be proven right. Mae, in turn, merely rolled her eyes. The amorphous animal was well aware that

Lotto couldn't understand her in animal form, instead finding correlation in whatever he was already thinking. Had he realised what Mae actually spoke, he'd have realised they'd nearly arrived.

Soon thereafter, the blackness ahead began forming into a greyness, with hints of architecture in the distance. A harbour grew out of nothing, and the ship slid silently into place.

"Aaah!" Lotto spat out the tea he'd been drinking, shooting up to his feet in an instant. Shortly, he arrived up on the hull, and walked down with Mae onto the haber. Finally arriving at the entrance to the Void Gate of the Plume Coteries' Library, the pair saw a terrible sign:

The Library opens at 8 a.m. on weekdays. Come back in the morning.

Lotto sank down to the floor in dismay. They had nowhere to go — they'd have to sleep here, on a border between reality and unreality, for an entire night, Whatever in Heaven that meant, here. Mae, now in feline form, curled up with Lotto, and they tried to get to sleep.

2.
Into the Library

Deep within the labyrinthine structure of the Library, an apparently adolescent girl —

No.

Deep within the Library, *an elderly-looking lady*….

No.

A woman in the prime of her life…

Deep within the labyrinthine structure of the Library, a woman apparently in the prime of her life was hiding under a staircase, panting. The Plume Coteries had arrived here ages ago — by variable account, decades, centuries, or a little under a billion years — but Viv-Gabriel Arch'ikarios was still scared of them. She'd been wandering around this library for longer than she could possibly remember, having travelled here during the founding wars of the Lightbringers — or, as she liked to think of them, the Darkness-Banishers. She'd been kicked out, like so many of what some called the Great Old Ones. A number had shunted themselves into parallel universes, or else had assimilated into the Lightbringer's new meta-structure of history, becoming Gods; but the vast majority had been slaughtered. Gabriel had tried leaving her home universe behind, but couldn't quite manage it, instead finding her resting place here. She was not quite alone, but it was ancient and quiet and far from prying eyes.

Then the Plume Coteries had come.

Ever since then, Gabriel had been running around the Library, trying her best to avoid the Bookkeepers. But it wasn't all bad; the arrival of the Plume Coteries had come with the arrival of the Birdhemoths, and by *golly* were they fun to ride. They reminded her of things of the old world. Cooped up in here, they now resembled giant chickens, but to Gabriel this just made them that much *cuter*. She'd occasionally taken one of them, nicknamed Majestie, out of the library by

means of the prehistoric labyrinth the Bookkeepers somehow *still* hadn't discovered.

On this particular day, which by the calendar of Gendar was nearing the winter solstice, and by the calendar of Old Earth, was Christmas Eve-Eve, Gabriel was hiding from a Bookkeeper, Sebastien III, who'd caught her signing her name all across various books.

When she'd finally come to rest, in a small room intended for study, she was remarkably near to the Void Gate Room. Tiredness suddenly overwhelmed the woman, and she curled up on a sofa, promptly falling to sleep.

The Head Receptionist of the Void Gate, Master Abigail von Strab'le, saw the large grandfather clock at the end of the hall chime eight o'clock, and reluctantly walked over, unlocking the grand wooden doors, but not *opening* them. Then, with painful slowness, he walked back to the Head Reception Desk, and sat behind it, finally pressing the button reading 'Open the Void Gate'.

At once, an old- and jolly-looking man, whose apparent age belied an aura of adventurous youth, stumbled into the Room, looking as though he'd just been asleep. With him was a cat — no, a girl — a small, messy, unkempt girl, perhaps his granddaughter. She seemed much more alert than her maybe-grandfather; she took in the sight of the Room for a moment, then walked up to the Head Receptionist's desk, pulling along the old man, who was still rubbing his eyes from apparent exhaustion. Once she got close enough, the girl lifted herself up to stare the Bookkeeper in the eye.

"Two entries to the Library, please."

Von Strab'le took out the scanning device he was required to use on every incoming visitor. First was the girl; more complicated that she appeared, that one — a complicated space-time event, perhaps some breed of Greater Time Elemental, though he wasn't sure. The old man was more surprising. After pinging him, he stared at the display for a moment, then repeated the motion, scanning the jolly-looking man a second time. Still the same: the biology resembled that of a standard Archon manifestation, so much so that Abigail

might almost have thought him to be a native of the Third Universe (as was his preferred term for it), were it not for the fact that the man seemed to possess no heart at all, let alone a *cœur de lumière*.

"You —" Von Strab'le hesitated, free hand involuntarily going up to feel his own chest. "Forgive me, you don't have a —"

"I know. We're sorry for any disturbance — ah, you see, we're fleeing from —" The old man seemed to hesitate. "From a world where the Gods have won the Cosmic War. Th-they have poisoned the heritage of the Cathedral. I had to cut out my one and only heart, and this one here", the jolly-looking man pointed at the girl by his side, "was my… granddaughter, the only family I have left."

"Ah. A common story, in its broad lines… This isn't a sanctuary from War," the Bookkeeper observed, his voice firm, though not unsympathetic.

"We know," the old man assured him. "We'll leave by closing time, find some other place to hide… For now, we'd just like to have a look around this Library. We've heard so much about it! Er, only good things, I assure you."

Abigail gave a thoughtful sigh before nodding.

"Come on in, then. Just be back by the twenty-second chime of the clock, and do not attempt to leave through the Cosmic Gate."

Mae and Lotto hurried on past, whilst the Head Receptionist began scanning the next visitor in line. Lady Aesculapius of the 10,000 Dawns. Again.

Hearing the deafening noise of the Bells of the Hour of Opening of Christmas Eve (*oh, how those Bookkeepers liked their fancy titles*), Gabriel begrudgingly awoke and opened the doors of the room she had slept in, planning on moving deeper into the library to avoid the prying eyes of the Bookkeepers — maybe even to hang out with Maritsa.

Standing in awe of the beauty of the Library, Lotto and Mae looked back at the Void Gate, and saw the queue of visitors growing ever larger, including the likes of Abraytha Janus Colefia of the Giekraal, Jenny Everywhere of the

31466344713163653th universe, and Mary Christmas of Christmasland. Had they the opportunity, Lotto would have loved to familiarise himself with his fellow visitors, but Mae was keeping them focused on their quest. They both looked up, and saw a forked grand staircase, its twin prongs landing on either side of the Desk, leading up into a higher floor. Deciding they would begin their quest for *The Book of Christmas* here, the pair took the right-hand staircase, and ascended.

* * *

Stepping out of the room she had slept in, Gabriel suddenly saw an elderly man and what she presumed was his granddaughter, walking up the stairs. She froze. These didn't look like members of the Plume Coteries — but they did appear to have only recently entered the Library. She didn't like new, unexpected things. Gabriel dashed back inside the room, looked around, and hid behind the sofa she'd previously slept on.

Lotto and Mae, unaware of Gabriel's presence, entered the room.

"You know, statistically speaking," Lotto was complaining, "finding this book is bound to be *very difficult*. I'm not exactly sure how that old man thought we'd possibly achieve it, in fact." He sighed. "I don't suppose we should be so lucky that the Bookkeepers of this place have maps?"

Perhaps I could help, thought Gabriel, but didn't say anything.

* * *

In the depths of the Outside, Auteur reached toward the Universe. Failing that, the ink from his pen dripped into a solitary bubble, one of the many surrounding the Cosmos-proper, and a book began to write itself…

* * *

"Ah-ha!" remarked Lotto, discovering that *The Book of Christmas* was located in this very room, on the top shelf.

Secretly he was slightly disappointed: a fine chance to show off his investigative skills had just been swept under the rug. Part of him regretted instinctively climbing up to the highest shelf. Still, in the end, an anticlimax was better than never finding the blasted thing.

Gabriel, however, was naught but shocked. The chance of someone finding the *specific* book they were looking for, practically immediately, was so small it scarcely bore thinking about. Betruth, she'd have given higher odds to the possibility that the Plume Coteries might stop burning the damned books.

Something was amiss…

3.
Silent Night, Holy Night

Once upon a time in the Universe, on the planet known to its descendants as Old Earth, in a land called Judaea, in a city called Bethlehem, a baby was born.

If he ever existed — and few things didn't — this baby's name would later be recorded as *Jesus Christ*, and his legacy would, further down the line, give the name of Christmas to a winter celebration in the western world, assembled out of half-forgotten stories — fragments of Yule and the Saturnalia.

Much ink would be spilled in later centuries concerning the life story of this baby, and particularly the tale of his birth. It was a lovely tale as far as it went, albeit a little static; soft-eyed donkey, blazing star, humbled Magi-Kings. What most recordings of this "first Christmas" missed, however — and this was quite possibly due to the mechanics of both metatime and transfictivity, more than any preventable oversight on the part of the storytellers — was this:

Immediately before Mary, mother of Christ, placed her son in the manger, he was whisked away to the Library of the Plume Coteries.

* * *

Back in the Library of the Plume Coteries, Lotto opened up the book on a random page, and before getting a chance to even glimpse at the writing within, heard the distant, yet distinct, sound of a newborn baby's cries, which seemed to be echoing all throughout the Library. Immediately, Lotto looked up and away from the book, which promptly shut itself. Gabriel held her breath — the granddaughter was gone, leaving a rabbit in her place. Strangely, the old man seemed completely nonplussed about this sudden change.

Pocketing the book in his large trench-coat, Lotto slowly walked out of the room — exiting, notably enough, through a different door than the one through which he had entered. On his face was the bespoke quizzical look of the seasoned detective. Mae followed, hopping.

Slowly, Gabriel got up from behind the sofa, waited a few seconds, and then silently followed Lotto and Mae, being equal parts curious about the baby, the book, and Lotto.

The pair weaved through corridors, down and up stairs, constantly listening out for the cries of this far-off infant who could somehow always be heard. For an old man with a limp and a walking stick, Gabriel found Lotto shockingly difficult to follow: making up for his unimpressive speed, the Archon would often stop unexpectedly and switch direction, his keen hearing aiding in the mission. A couple of times, this almost resulted in Gabriel revealing herself.

Finally, after what felt to Gabriel like an hour, Lotto and Mae entered a large, open room. The phrase which came to mind, absurdly enough, was "a clearing in a forest". Lying in the middle of the room was a small baby, who gave off the aura of having been born *incredibly* recently, whilst appearing to be several months old. Gabriel, being in some arguable respects a deity, could sense another deity when they were in the room. And she could sense a youthful one right here — a person of the Triune God of Old Earth. Almost feeling the urge to laugh at the absurdity of the situation, Gabriel realised the unassailable truth: here was Jesus Christ, straight out of the most literal-minded of religious tableaus. She let out an audible gasp, and Mae turned around.

Gabriel froze.

She didn't know what to do. Mae slowly approached her, even as Lotto, unaware, cautiously approached the crying child.

Gabriel's seventeen micro-hearts, arranged all over her body as if a constellation, sped up tremendously. She was ready to bolt from the room, down the corridors, and right out of the Cosmic Gate. Maybe she could find some place to hide in the Amazolian System (that being, if she recalled correctly where the Gate exited). She'd heard from Maritsa that Coloth had good things to say about, certainly.

And yet — she couldn't run. Not that she was merely paralysed with fear — no, her sentiment was far worse, far more dangerous. She had a feeling, slowly

creeping into her mind, that *maybe this rabbit and its companion would be nice* — even as every other part of her screamed that this completely unjustified trust was sure to be the end of her.

The rabbit touched her leg with its paws, and Gabriel passed out.

* * *

Lotto reached out, and picked up the baby in his arms — which he did somewhat haphazardly, not having held one with his particular pair of limbs before.

Crash.

"Wh —"

Lotto swivelled around 180-degrees, nearly dropping the Son of God in the process. A somewhat ethereal woman of peculiarly indeterminable age was lying on the floor, seemingly passed out, with Mae's paw covering her hand.

"Hmm…"

Lotto stared at the pair, curious about this woman. Had she been following them for long? He would've tried to figure something out about her, but the baby was still crying in his arms. In a rush, Lotto gently shushed and rocked the baby.

"Oh don't worry, little one," he muttered soothingly. "We're just going to help this lady and then help you find your parents, whoever they are, mh? There, there."

Rearranging the baby in his arms, Lotto walked over to Mae, knelt down and placed the baby back on the floor nearby, wrapped in his long purple scarf. Then, he peered at the woman. Her eye twitched, opened, and then closed again. Mae looked up at Lotto, and he got the idea he should leave the room. Picking up the baby, Lotto begrudgingly complied.

* * *

Gabriel slowly, cautiously, opened one eye. She saw the rabbit. She closed the eye. She opened the eye again, saw the rabbit, and kept her eye open.

Trembling only slightly, Viv-Gabriel stood up, and looked down at the rabbit. The rabbit stared at her, as if peering through her soul, and she, strangely enough, felt herself *relaxing*.

The rabbit backed away slowly, clearly trying not to scare the woman, and slowly, non-threateningly, transformed herself into the scruffy girl from earlier. Her eyes and hair were purple, making her look Gendar, although Gabriel got the distinct impression this was intentional.

Smiling gently, the Gendar girl helped Gabriel up, patted the dust off her, and stared at her again. Composing herself, the false Gendar girl held out her hand, and said:

"My name is Mae, what's yours?"

"...Viv-Gabrie'l Arch–arch—" She stammered. "Er, never mind all that. Call me… Gabriel."

Mae smiled again. Gabriel smiled back.

"It's very nice to meet you," said Mae. "Can I introduce you to my friend? He's really quite harmless."

Gabriel pursed her lips, but gave a resolute nod, met with another smile from Mae.

"Lotto! You can come back now!" shouted Mae.

"Shh! You'll attract the Bookkeepers!" cautioned Gabriel.

"Oh, sorry…" Mae whispered.

Lotto came back in, with a worrying bounce in his step for someone carrying a now-sleeping baby. "Hello," he whispered, "I'm sure my friend here has introduced us."

"I — careful! In your arms! Jesus Christ!" Gabriel suddenly shouted, uncaring of the slight hypocrisy.

Mae rolled her eyes. Lotto looked quizzically at the infant.

"What about h —" He blinked, and his eyebrows shot up. "*Jesus Christ!?*"

"Jesus Christ," Gabriel repeated again, with a nod.

"You all shouldn't swear so much," Mae said with an equanimous smile. "It's naughty."

"No, I… it's what?" Lotto took a moment to glaring at Mae, who smirked. Oh. She *knew* what Gabriel meant.

Gabriel, mustering all the courage she needed not to cry whilst talking to a complete stranger, sighed and explained again.

"Jesus. Christ, son and person of God, and son of Mary. Is. In your arms."

She forced the words out with great effort; each sentence-fragment was spoken in the calmest voice she could muster, but the stilted sequence was less than serene in effect.

Lotto's more reserved side crumbled quickly, holding the baby just slightly more tightly as Mae began to investigate. Those piercing eyes stared at Gabriel once again as she asked:

"And why should either of us believe you? Don't think me rude, but it looks like you were following us. Bit suspicious. And that wasn't your full True Name you gave, just now. So. Why should we believe you when you say something like — that?"

"...because I'm a protohistoric inhabitant of this Library?"

"Yes, well, that doesn't help —" Mae said with a casual shrug. "I mean, why should we believe *that*?"

"I — well —" Gabriel snapped her fingers, face brightening at a sudden idea. "Oh, I know! Don't you Archons have some kind of telepathic ability? Just read my mind, sense if I'm telling the truth. Go on, I'll let you."

Mae looked to Lotto expectently, who gave a bashful nod.

"Right. Yes. You know, I often forget I can do that," Lotto admitted.

He visibly concentrated for a few minutes of very awkward silence, during which Gabriel analysed the cover of a nearby book entitled *The Beauty in a Paradox*. It featured an apparently human girl amongst an assortment of aliens, and a red telephone box.

"...You're telling the truth," he concluded. "I think. It's hard to tell."

Lotto, as his recent display had just made obvious, was *incredibly* poor at the spiritual or psychic aspects of Archonhood. Which was *somewhat* ironic, considering he was a detective, but he liked to believe a true detective took no shortcuts through the journey of a mystery. Before Sherlock Holmes was turned into fiction, Lotto had enjoyed spending time with him, seeing who could figure out a case before the other. Sherlock often won, of course.

"Wow. I'm not sure I've *ever* met an Archon who was *that* bad at this," Gabriel commented, her tone too genuinely bemused to come across as insulting. "Er — granted, I haven't met that many. Anyway; now that you know I'm telling the truth, shouldn't we put this Jesus guy… back where he came from?"

"…Nazareth?"

"No no no, you silly," Gabriel corrected, shocked at her own confidence in obscure religious lore. "What we need is Bath — Belli… Bethlehem, that's the one. He *grew up* in Nazareth — er, or he will do — but look at him, this little guy's only just been born. *In Bethlehem*. That's where we need to put him back."

"And how, exactly, do you plan on doing that?"

Gabriel considered using her secret labyrinth, but decided against revealing it unless absolutely necessary. "I'm not sure."

Mae rolled her eyes, and spoke.

"I can literally take you anywhere in the universe, Lotto. Remember?"

"Very true, Mae, but we're not *in* the universe right now! One wrong turn and we could end up in another universe's Bethlehem altogether! The last thing we need is to give some Jesus Christ a twin!" replied Lotto. "A single one is enough of a distraction — can you imagine what two of them could to a human noosphere? To the course of History itself?"

"That *can* be solved, all we need to do is travel through the Cosmic —" They gave her pained looks before she'd even finished. "Oh, you two came through the Void Gate, didn't you? So you can't go through the Cosmic Gate! *Bugger!*" Gabriel groaned in frustration.

Mae and Lotto exchanged glances, but didn't say anything.

Gabriel decided it *was* absolutely necessary. "I know another way into the Universe. Well, parts of it. And it's dangerous."

"We're listening," Gabriel and Mae said in unison.

"Follow me, then."

The pair followed Gabriel in silence, and butterflies danced through her stomach, as she realised she had just *enjoyed* talking to new people, for the first time in a while; Maritsa was her only other friend.

After going through many corridors and a variety of secret passageways, the trio, with Lotto still carrying baby Jesus, arrived at a small hole in the wall, appearing to be a small cave entrance. Gabriel went on all fours, signalling the others to follow, and crawled through. After departing this maze, each member of the party would recall being in a completely ordinary labyrinth, although Lotto was very sceptical of the truth of this recollection. Regardless, they made it out to the other side, to the planet Proxima Centauri d, commonly referred to by its inhabitants as "Centauri", although this infuriated cosmologists, as the other two planets around Proxima Centauri did this same thing.

Once there, they briefly stopped to appreciate the beautiful night sky, landled with stars. The baby stared as well, with a satisfied smile which was distinctly that of someone who held himself responsible for putting the stars there in the first place.

"No you *didn't*," Lotto felt compelled to say as a Sun Builder. "Not actually."

But he had. In his story, he had. The baby twittered innocently.

At last, Mae, again in rabbit form, led the others to a corner, around which they walked. In a flash, they appeared just inside the Gate to Bethlehem, at the point where the letters B.C. gave way to the letters A.D.. The Year 0 — the First Christmas — compressed into a single, magical instant. As a veteran of the Cosmic War, Lotto was quite familiar with such things.

They began to briskly walk in the direction of the Inn, before being interrupted by a group of regally-adorned wise men, riding on the backs of camels. One of these men, these Kings, shouted over to the group.

"Young lady," he said, presumably addressing Gabriel — "know ye where the Castle of the King of Heaven and Earth may be found? We followed the Star…"

The dark-skinned wise man pointed up at the sky, where a blazing jewel of light, more like a four-pointed diamond than any ball of flaming gas the time-travellers had ever seen, was hovering in place. The sight shocked Lotto to such an extent that he almost fell back, only to be saved by what seemed to him like the baby in his arms impossibly *yanking* him upward again.

It seemed to have stopped somewhere over the town — though it was hard to go from such broad impressions to a particular street address, especially in an era that rather predated street-signs.

"We followed that bright star all this way from our kingdoms," another Magus elaborated, "but its guidance through the City proper has proved lacking."

"Twice," the third explained, "we have rounded back and attempted to follow it to the Palace of the King of Kings, only to find ourselves at a dead-end — a stable behind some inn or tavern —"

"Truly, we three would be most in your debt," the first Magus finished.

"We're not from –", Lotto began, only to be shushed by Gabriel.

"Ah. I see where you've become confused," she said lightly. "We'd be happy to guide you! Just heading that way ourselves, in fact."

The King who had spoken looked very smugly to his two compatriots; clearly they hadn't believed he'd get them any help.

"Are you indeed?" he said in a pleased tone. "Have you brought something, then, to present to the Holy Family?"

Gabriel, Lotto and Mae shared a look.

"You could say that," Gabriel said uneasily. "Well, we'd better get going…"

As the sextet drew nearer and nearer to the Inn, and the Stable, the Magi talked to Lotto – who was, as ever, eager to learn – about their lives in the east, and the kingdoms they presided over. As the conversation progressed, Lotto got the distinct impression these people didn't have fully-fledged backstories, as if they'd been thrown together haphazardly by some mad author…

"*Lotto* —" Gabriel whispered, jerking a finger in the direction of the Inn, which they had almost reached.

"Oh! Uh… good talking, you Three Kings of Orient Are sure quite knowledgeable, I'm certain that Messiah of yours will *love* the gifts… Anyway, must dash…"

And he was off, not running but getting as close as he could with an infant in his arms, toward the stables around the back.

"Forsooth he will!" bellowed that same, enthusiastic King. "We have for him gold, frankincense, and myrrh!"

Without turning around, Lotto gave them a double thumbs-up.

"Great stuff! Every baby's fondest dreams, those are! Toodle-oo!"

Lotto burst in the stable, catching a distraught Mary. Although this complicated events, Lotto seemed absolutely determined to announce his presence.

"Hello!" he warmly greeted, "Sorry for the disturbance. You see, um…" Lotto recovered less-than-decorously from the toll the run had taken on his ageing physiology, and panted for a time before he continued. "I'm… ah, an angel of the Lord, or something," he muttered — close enough, close enough. "Er, here he is again. God… was just making sure your baby was healthy. You know, one has to weigh them and suchlike, mh? Well, it'll be all the rage someday…"

Finding solace in his patter, which was preventing the legendary virgin opposite him from asking any inconvenient questions, so gobsmacked was she, Lotto placed the baby back in the manger. He gave a dutiful nod to the shocked lady as he awarded her "top marks!", and was almost tempted to stop and chat some more as she gave him a timid, thankful smile — but that was a big enough footprint of history already, he supposed.

The Three Kings, aided by a trio of mysterious strangers, arrived just before the Shepherds. They could not help but notice that the baby in the manger looked rather familiar; but, they supposed, some things were not for even the wisest of men to understand.

* * *

Auteur, in his hiding-place outside reality, allowed himself a frustrated shriek. He'd worked hard to put that gap there, in one of the greatest myths of Earth. If he'd only had longer to reduce himself into a skeletal little infant — gotten himself mailed to Bethlehem —

— ah, well, it had been a far-fetched dream. He put the scheme out of his mind. There were other means to break in…

4.
The Bridge

The detective, rabbit, and protohistoric woman returned to the Library of the Plume Coteries by doing all the aforementioned steps backward, this time ending up in a cosy room with a fireplace.

Lotto sat down in the armchair, Mae on his lap, and Gabriel sitting cross-legged opposite. Feeling at his pocket, he pulled up *The Book of Christmas* and cracked it open. Turning past the author's note, copyright, and "thank you"s, he was mildly surprised to note that the author had, for some reason, been credited entirely in French. Finally, he found the first page of the first chapter.

The last time he'd opened the book, he'd opened it thoughtlessly, and had more than an inkling that this fact and the mysterious appearance of an imaginary infant in the Library had not been unconnected. This time, he took great care to respect the artefact of paper and cardboard. Another step beyond the deterministic rationalism of his home culture, he reflected — though living objects had not been unknown to his Lords on the Morning Star.

The book seemed receptive to his careful handling, and gave no signs of sparking further supernatural shenanigans as he began to make his way into the contents. The opening paragraph seemed to describe a journey of two children into the land of Santa Claus. As the tale got underway, it became apparent that they had visited this "Christmasland" before; the old sprite welcomed them as old friends, even asking after their family.

Near the beginning of the second chapter, by which point Lotto had begun reading aloud to the attentive Mae and Gabriel, a mischievous group of Elves stole a device instrumental to Santa's ability to deliver presents across the world, termed the "Claus-Rosen Bridge", planning to use it to access to every Christmas in the world and give all the children coal. It was around this point that Lotto began to articulate the thought that the plot, far from the benign

Christmas tale he had anticipated, seemed like the product of a deranged mind. Was this a fairy-tale, or high-concept science fiction?

He voiced this opinion aloud; Gabriel thought for a moment, and objected that "such absurd things only happen in reality".

* * *

Across the borders of fiction, the Author of All the Universe spread his ink across the snowy lattice around Christmasland, bringing up a faction of devious Elves into one of the many workshops of Father Christmas. Generations passed.

* * *

Far away, at the Void Gate, seven Elves — who would perhaps be more accurately described as "imps" — carried a large machine, which looked rather less like a serious piece of dimensional engineering and rather more like an off-brand *Stargate* television prop, though it was no less efficacious for it.

It was far too large for the imps, who struggled under the weight, as the Head Receptionist of the Void Gate, Master Abigail von Strab'le, scanned them all, indeed finding them to be from "Christmasland", just like the Mary Christmas he had vetted earlier. The imps giggled as they ventured past the Desk, into the depths of the Library; and though his scanner had detected nothing amiss, Von Strab'le could not escape the suspicion that they were pulling a fast one over him, somehow.

* * *

Whilst Lotto read, the clock chimed nineteen times, and they all looked up.

"Hm. Not closing time yet," said Lotto, eyes wavering between the clock and the strangely alluring book.

"Not quite," said Gabriel, determined, "but it will be soon. Wouldn't you rather let me show you around for a bit? I don't know why you wanted this book, but…"

"I wouldn't say it's really holding its promises, no," Lotto frowned.

His thoughts felt clearer as he snapped the book shut — though not before placing a bookmark where he had stopped. Why had he kept reading it for so long? It certainly held no clues to his forgotten memories. He wasn't even sure the children in the tale were supposed to be human.

After placing *The Book* down on his chair, Lotto picking up Mae, placing the now-dormouse to comfortably sit in his scarf, he led the way out of the room, looking over his shoulder to call after the immortal woman, who was still sitting down, her gaze distant as she considered what directions to give to her new friends. She hoped she might run into Maritsa —

"Gabby! Come on!" said Lotto.

"Don't call me that", Gabriel replied, voice cool, as she rose to her feet.

"Er, sorry," Lotto mumbled.

Gabriel strived ahead, pushing past Lotto. After a minute, she realised he might, perhaps, have interpreted her response as a mark of irritation, and flashed a smile back at him.

* * *

The imps lifted the Claus-Rosen Bridge across the entrance hall, determined to reach the fabled *Krismasbuk* from the tales of their Creator. The tabloids they had inherited from the previous generation's previous generation,spanning back to time untold, told of a pendant, given to the first Elf Mischiéve, which could guide the way to the *Krismasbuk*.

They were the Chosen, they knew — the later generations of Elf Mischiéve — the ones who had finally stolen into the largest factory of Master Claus. It was, they felt, to the applause of generations of ghosts, watching from that secret underworld where evil Elves went to die, that they had acquired a sled; that they had suborned the reindeer Prancer and Blixem; that they had traversed the Great Black Void, always following the guide of the pendant.

And none of these Imps of Fate was prouder than Hans Von Waldamon, the leader of their party. It was he who held the pendant, blazing red like a hellish beacon as it beckoned them ever onwards.

Honni soit qui mal y pense[1]*:* it looked not at all like the nose of any unpopular deuterocanonical reindeer.

* * *

"If I may be so bold as to inquire," Lotto said as they made their way through the Library — "how *do* reality and time and, ah, whatnot… that is, how do they *work* here?"

Gabriel glanced back at him with a raised eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

"I mean the child. I understand that we're on the borders of this universe, so it's not hard to deduce it's easier for things to cross the interdimensional schisms here than it would be in the Cradle itself… Yet you seemed surprised, and you live here, yes? Let us assume that we were correct; that we indeed found the Son of God, or *a* son of *a* God, at least. How then — *how,* in fact — did he end up in the Library, out of time, or out of the book, whichever it was? It's not an ordinary phenomenon, is it?"

"Well, yes and no…" Gabriel started before stopping. It was strange. People had been known to end up here by accident, but not often, and especially not newborn children. "The child must have been placed here," she realised, speaking as much to herself as to the Archon.

"I see," Lotto said as his hand held the book through his coat. "The question then is who could have… hmm. Tell me, do you know what *Auteur* means?"

"Oh, that's simple. It's a human word — French."

"Yes, I thought it was," Lotto nodded, walking along. He briefly touched the head of his cane to his lips. "But what does it *mean*?"

[1] "Shame on anyone who thinks badly of it"

"It just means… author," Gabriel replied. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh, no reason, just curious," Lotto lied, smiling.

Now, where *had* he heard that name before… He felt as if his brain was clouding, preventing him from remembering precisely what he — well, never mind. He could pick his memory on human literary jargon once he was back home. There were sights to see before Closing Time came around.

* * *

The trio had been exploring – Mae in her often-preferred form of a rabbit — for some time when Gabriel stopped dead in her tracks — her beautiful form becoming still as a statue. Footsteps, dozens of them, were storming down the Library with a sense of serious intent that made her blood run cold. Had she been clumsy? Maybe she'd been spotted — maybe she'd been tracked down. Curse her for daring to spend time with her new friends! She'd known it could only be a matter of time —

Lotto and Mae watched with silent curiosity as she quickly dodged into a nook between bookshelves — a simple, but effective hiding spot.

"What are you doing?" Lotto asked before she quickly shushed him.

"Just blend in! Look inconspicuous!" she pleaded, her tone one of pure worry.

He wasted no time moving over to a nearby bookshelf, better covering the nook using the bulk of his own frame. Mae hopped out to maintain their story, turning back into the young woman as the footsteps passed. It was only a few more seconds before the sound passed, Gabriel giving a sigh of relief.

"Sorry," she said meekly as she left her hiding spot. "I should probably explain…"

Lotto shook his head swiftly, "No need. We all have our reasons and I won't pry any further than we need. Besides, can't we always trust a friend?" He hoped a smile would help Gabriel to relax.

"It looks like they're heading in the direction we came from," Mae noted as they quietly wandered down the corridor. She had kept a careful eye on those passing by, although she couldn't quite put her finger on what they were. Some kind of Christmas Elves, she fancied, only warped by… something. They had already vanished out of sight by the time she reached the end of the corridor, but she was certain that their footsteps were heading deeper into the Library, just where they'd come from.

Lotto looked quickly up at Gabriel, now with his mind set to a mission. "How well are you able to change your form?"

Gabriel blinked, caught off guard by the question. "Well… It's rather complicated," she explained, "but I can essentially change my form freely. Sometimes I change whenever people aren't looking."

"Excellent! I need you to focus very carefully," he instructed her, standing by her side. "I need you to copy Mae's exact form here."

"What? Why?"

"Because you're very clearly hiding from something and, while I won't ask why, I'd rather we didn't all get noticed. You need to copy her form — age, height, how she walks down to the hairs on her head, every detail so nobody suspects a thing. Can you do that?"

"Of course she can," Mae said, speaking to Lotto, but reassuring Gabriel herself. "She's very talented, I can tell."

Gabriel stopped for a moment, both this request and the proceeding complement catching her off-guard. She nodded, and… changed. There was no flash of light or transitional haze; she changed from one instant to the next, like the most primitive of editing effects — now identical to the form Mae had taken earlier, not the Gendar, but the less placeable the Head Receptionist had mistaken for Lotto's granddaughter.

Lotto gave an excited cheer, applauding Gabriel. Mae swiftly changed herself into a robin, fluttering up to sit on Lotto's scarf.

"Now then!" he called, "Come along, Gabriel!"

* * *

Led by Hans Von Waldamon, the impish Elves continued dragging the Claus-Rosen Bridge through the seemingly-endless network of bookcases. Every time they turned a corner, the edges of the Bridge collided with a bookcase, requiring additional manoeuvring, and frequently knocking books onto the floor (not that the Elves actually cared about *that*). One imp, stubbing his green toe on a falling book, paused for a few seconds. Whilst nursing his injury, this Elf — who happened to be called Chortle Von Krampus, and took that name quite seriously — looked over at a parallel path and saw a man.

This was not, in itself, remarkable; but the man seemed to be around the same age as Master Claus, and was being led along by what looked like his granddaughter, with a rabbit hopping along. Momentarily puzzled, the Elf quickly moved on, anxious to catch up with the group.

"Halt!" Von Waldamon demanded, stopping so fast that all five of the remaining Elves holding the Bridge crashed into each other. The machine dropped to the floor, and one rivet fell away, rolling sideways into the corridor inhabited by that strange man, the one who looked aged like Christmas.

"The fabled, ever legendary, and all-dominating *Krismasbuk* is close! By my calculations, it should be in one of these rooms nearby," Von Waldamon bellowed.

By calculations, he meant only that he had observed the pull of the pendant, but this leadership gig was his chance to prove himself a superior kind of Elf, and he was going to milk it for all he was worth. He'd already begun growing a little red goatee on his pointed green chin.

Whilst the other five imps began ferociously searching, and Hans studied his pendant with obvious glee, Chortle ran into the adjacent corridor to pick up the

missing rivet, hoping to replace it before Von Waldamon noticed — or at least to gain his praise for returning it, rather than his ire for losing it.

* * *

Gabriel, Mae, and Lotto continued down the corridor, with Mae and Lotto encouraging Gabriel to point things out and explain them. For Mae, being in robin-form, this admittedly consisted mainly of chirping insistently, but the others got the gist.

However, a bare few minutes into this endeavour, Mae began chirping rather *too* insistently — and loudly, at that. Gabriel, being ahead, turned around, and saw the cause of her distress: the same maybe-Elf she'd spotted earlier, now peering curiously at the trio. He was little and green, dressed in dark, vaguely-mediaeval clothing; his hat was pointy, as were his ears, his chin, and his nose.

They looked back, confused. Paying them no mind, the Elf spotted something of clear interest on the floor, picked it up, and quickly dashed away.

Such a sight, without warning or explanation, would leave any human slightly dazed at best — but then again, it was fairly mild as experiences in the Library went. And yet Lotto noticed Gabriel seemed to be thinking quite hard.

"What is it, Lotto?" he asked.

"I feel I know where that guy comes from… Spending so long in the Library, it's difficult to keep track of visitors, but I *swear*…"

Mae, on Lotto's shoulder, stared at Gabriel. Surprisingly, this helped.

"I've got it! 925 Christmases ago, that specific Elf delivered my Christmas present to me!"

"I say — what an astonishing memory you have," Lotto murmured with woeful envy. He hesitated. "I… uhm… wait a tick. Christmas Elves are real?"

"Why, of course, silly! And they live in Christmasland."

"A pocket dimension, I take it?" asked Lotto, trying to remember if he'd seen it mentioned in the book onboard the sailing ship.

"Not exactly," said Gabriel, earning an anger-less 'Dammit' from Lotto. "But something like that, yes. They *used* to live at the North Pole, of course — some say they only moved because of all the planes flying over the North Pole starting around the 20th century…"

"O-kay. And why would one be here, now?"

"Well, it *is* Christmas in the morning… in fact, in only a few hours' time!" Gabriel said, checking her watch. She frowned. "But he didn't seem to be carrying any presents…"

The robin on Lotto's shoulder visibly rolled its eyes. This being a tall order for a robin, she transformed her face into a vaguely humanoid one for the purpose — briefly throwing Lotto off-balance as he adjusted to the increased weight — and said:

"Guys, if you're curious, he's a bright idea: *follow the Elf*."

The two humanoids exchanged glances, and ran down the corridor in the direction the Elf had appeared.

* * *

Chortle arrived back at the Bridge, and began re-inserting the missing rivet, before feeling an astonishingly pointy shadow cast across him.

He looked up.

Hans Von Waldamon stared down.

"That wouldn't have fallen out if you'd been helping to carry the Bridge — my — *our* legacy! — rather than tending to your little 'injwuries'! You're a disgrace!"

The words bellowed out of his mouth in an explosion of rage. Chortle did not chortle, but cowered into himself, collapsing into a foetal position on the floor.

Hans extracted the metal spike from the poor Elf's hand, and placed it back into the Bridge.

"Sir! Sir! Master! Er — *Von*!" shouted a small Elf named Jolly bar-Claus.

Hans raised a pointy eyebrow. He couldn't, of course, be seen to smile, unless it was a devious grin. And yet — in stark contrast to his disposition towards the discredit to the forces of mischief that was Chortle, he was inclined to like this Elf, who had remembered that he preferred to be called by his middle name, which too many people for his liking had a habit of confusing for the German preposition *von*.

"Yes? What is it, Bar?" asked Hans, attempting to extend him the same courtesy, and quite unaware that *bar-* was really an Old Elvish nobiliary preposition.

"I've found the book!" said Jolly, electing not to mention it.

With a mask of begrudging, but secretly filled with the highest anticipation, Hans walked over to the Elf, and picked the book out of his hand.

* * *

Turning the corner, the three first saw the defeated imp-elf, and then quickly saw the strange *Stargate*-like device. The largest Elf, seemingly the leader, was holding *The Book of Christmas*. He dropped it into the device, and…

* * *

Their apotheosis was upon them! The Elves, bar Chortle, surrounded the Bridge as its centre increased in brightness —

* * *

Auteur sensed it. Every Christmas was at his fingertips. Soon he would step through them, *becoming* them all, and from there — history would warp, shudder, and re-coalesce around his Will. He would be the new Lord Founder of a new

Morning Star — heralding a horde of *Grigori* consisting of his own characters —

5.
Saving Christmas

"No!" Gabriel shouted, louder than Lotto and Mae were aware she was capable, causing the Elves to all turn 'round, in shock. "That… that's the device Santa uses to deliver his presents at Christmas…"

Hans and the rest of his Elves smirked, clearly enjoying Gabriel's distress.

"Not to ask a stupid question, but *why does Santa have a portal?* And how do you *recognise it on sight?*" implored Lotto.

"How else would he get to everyone on Christmas, silly? And, wouldn't it be *weirder* if I hadn't visited the Claus-Rosen Bridge in Christmasland at *some* point since time immemorial?"

Hans rolled his eyes, picked his pointy hat off, and threw it in Gabriel's face, toppling her over. Whilst Lotto ran over to help her, the imp-elves all jumped into the Bridge, save, again, for Chortle.

The three stared at each other. Lotto was about to run into the Bridge after the Elves, but Gabriel held him back with a shout of "Stop!".

Lotto stopped, looking back at Gabriel. "B-but the Elves — saving Christmas —"

"I doubt that Bridge *does* actually connect Christmasland," she explained. "It's meant to be used *from* there, and if anyone knows how to turn that thing off, it'd be Father Christmas."

"Alright, then," said Lotto, slipping into investigation-mode. "Alright. What, exactly, has this Bridge opening actually done?"

"I'm not certain, but if anyone had access to every Christmas…. Just imagine how much of history they could hold in their palm… It'd be like your people's protohistory all over again."

Lotto thought back to that Shambler from the Stars trapped at the edge of the universe, held in an eternal vice-grip between the knuckles of a Lightbringer. He thought back to his War-time masters. To the hunted look in Gabriel's eyes.

And nodded.

"How do we get there?"

"I'm really not sure…" Gabriel apologised. "The Elves probably came here with some reindeer, but I doubt they'd be willing to take some randos back to Christmasland, if they haven't left already."

Mae jumped down from Lotto's shoulder, transforming into a poshly-dressed young boy. "I remember, after me and Lotto came through the Void Gate, hearing the Head Receptionist say 'Mary Christmas'. I'd thought it wasn't the genuine deal, but now…"

"Brilliant!"

"Wait!" Lotto shouted, and they both paused, looking at him. "In that book, the one that Elf just threw into the Bridge… I remember seeing the word 'Auteur' in the author's notes over and over… Maybe he's the one authoring the events before us, first the child and now this."

Gabriel seemed sceptical. "What, some guy called himself 'Author'? Seems a bit unlikely."

"Says the girl who's been living in a library outside the universe since before the beginning of time, apparently."

"...I don't get your point."

Lotto rolled his eyes. "*Anyway*… My point is, I think I recall this man — or whatever he is now. From a legend I was taught back at Cahlough… He's one of my own people, or he was, at any rate. Let me think — ah yes — the story went that he got eaten by a serpent in the very first years of the Cosmic War. Seems it didn't stick. Well, we *are* a stubborn bunch when it comes to dying."

Mae looked very serious, as if she recognised this tale, so Gabriel accepted it.

"Okay. What I'm hearing is, we need to stop this 'author' guy from overtaking the Cosmos, or bad things will happen."

"Well, overtaking Christmas at least. There's a difference. One makes him an egomaniac villain, the other just makes him a killjoy."

Gabriel, in the form of Lotto's supposed granddaughter, led the way toward the Void Gate, with Mae quickly turning back into a dormouse and slipping into Lotto's pocket. After a number of mis-turns, the party reached the entrance hall, and Gabriel walked up to the desk.

Head Receptionist Master Abigail von Strab'le turned her head toward the noise, seeing it was the granddaughter from earlier in the day. "What do you want?"

"D-did Mary Christmas come through here today? Where could we find her?"

Rolling his eyes, Abigail replied in monotone. "Information about visitors to the Library is strictly confidential."

"Oh… okay," Gabriel walked off, back to her 'grandfather'.

"Dear dear dear. What're we gonna do now?" Lotto wondered aloud.

No one had any ideas, so they slowly wandered back to the Claus-Rosen Bridge.

* * *

Oh dear, oh dear, whatever shall I do? wondered Mary Christmas. She hadn't managed to find the renegade Elves since she'd arrived in the library, and sensed, in the way only a Claus could, that the Bridge had been opened. Christmas was, in all likelihood, ruined. Now, forever, and for-never.

On the plus side, she could also sense *where* the Bridge was, and so began walking in its direction, hoping she could maybe turn it off and lessen the impact of that damnable *Grigoris*.

* * *

They were nearing where they'd left the Bridge again, and Lotto looked up. Suddenly, his eyes illuminated.

"Mary Christmas?" he whispered, and then louder, "Mary Christmas!"

The plump woman in red and green turned around, worry written all across her face.

"My children! I'm afraid this year's Christmas is ruined... and soon, last year's, and all the years that have been…"

"Not so fast! Take us to Christmasland, and we can…. wait, Gabriel, how *are* we planning on undoing all this?" Lotto belatedly thought to ask.

Gabriel looked at a loss for words for just a moment, before composing herself. It had been a long time since she'd left the Library, but desperate times…

"Lady Christmas —" The woman turned to face her, and Gabriel's formal tone slipped as soon as it had come. "…*Please* can you just take us to Christmasland? We'll figure out what to do then. With Father Christmas and all his Elves there to help… it should be easier."

The wintery woman brightened.

"Ah. A motley crew of heroes ready to save Christmas. Just the thing. Of *course* I'll help, dearie. Now, which way to the Void Gate?"

Now smiling brightly, the little woman trussed up her sleeves, and, single-handedly picking up the Claus-Rosen Bridge, she set about carrying it back with her.

The small imp-elf, Von, grabbed onto Gabriel's clothes; she turned around, shocked, and looked as such to the lad.

"*Please. Plea* - take me back with you, Christmas," the Elf begged, making eye contact with Mary Christmas. "Please, I'll die out here if you leave me alone," he

added, seeing Christmas's stern look. "I… I didn't want things to go this far! This wasn't my fault, it was the others! T-This never should've happened, I'm so sorry."

Before Mary could make any dismissive comments, Gabriel quickly took control of the situation. "Of course we'll take you with us, *won't we?*" Gabriel unilaterally concluded, her tone implying that any counter would *not* be accepted. The rest of the group obliged, with varying levels of reluctance. She nodded at that choice, crouching down to Chortle's eye level. "Come on, let's get you home."

Chortle did chortle, now, just a little — and followed the group toward the Void Gate.

* * *

Mary Christmas, followed by four humanoids, all boarded the Mother Christmas Sled, led by Donner, Comet, and Dasher. In no time at all — for time is a dimension largely irrelevant to the Great Black Void — the squad arrived on the shores of Christmasland, the aurora borealis stretching out over the distant horizon.

They began their slow and steady trek through the snow and towards the grotto, where they prayed that the Father was sitting by his hearth.

* * *

25 December 1996 — Earth. Every child across the globe gets a piece of coal in their stocking, delivered by the Krampus. (The actual one.)

* * *

They passed by a monolith in the distinct shape of candy-cane. The grotto was getting nearer, but was still quite distant. Mae had *considered* suggesting she teleport them all, before remembering that the metastructure of reality in this bubble universe was likely vastly different from within the Universe itself, and so they could end up anywhere.

Five minutes later, she did end up having to explain this to Lotto.

* * *

25 December 2025 — Earth. A popular science-fiction television show fails to air its festive special, due to the corporation running it being forcibly liquidated overnight, worsened by a subsequent rights issue. This breaks the hearts of innumerable fans, ruining Christmas that year, and putting the series on its second decade-long hiatus.

* * *

The grotto was very close now — Lotto could make out a fire blazing, just beyond the window.

* * *

25 December ~10^{32} A.D — An unnamed planet which certain entries in *The Cosmography* insisted was some kind of temporal echo of the 8th doppelganger-world of the Morning Star.

A female tyrant enacts a declaration to fill the southern hemisphere with factories pumping out so much smoke the sky becomes obscured, making the inhabitants largely unaware of alien life. For generations to come, the day becomes a byword for misery and obscurantism in the entire star cluster.

* * *

They had reached the grotto, and brushed down their boots on the doormat. Lotto rattled the knocker, and the door slowly opened — revealing a large man with a long white beard and a thick, green coat. His face was glowing, emanating the pure joy of the Christmas spirit.

Mary dropped the Claus-Rosen Bridge onto the floor — causing all the snow they'd trampled in to fly into the air, landing softly on top of Lotto, Gabriel, Mae, Santa, and Von (who went to sit near the fire, keeping warm).

"Ho-ho-ho!" chortled Father Christmas. "Well then! Is the sanctity of the solstice in utter jeopardy?"

It was quite unnerving hearing him sound so jolly whilst talking about such a serious topic, although it *did*, admittedly, lighten the mood.

Lotto was the one to finally step forward.

"Now, er, Santa… that is, Master Cl — Father C*hr* — sorry, what should I call you? Only, I'm not actually human — that is, I haven't been in a long time —"

"Ho-ho-ho, I know you, Lightbringer," he said, his eyes twinkling. "My friends among your kind have always known me as… Geoff. "

"Oh…" Trying not to break the mood, Lotto prevented himself from trailing off, and lamely continued: "…ho ho." He blinked. "Well then, ahm, Geoff, here's the situation…"

* * *

All across time, the holiday hecatomb continued. Even as Lotto was catching Geoff up, another Christmas fell — 8654 B.C. Not, strictly speaking, a *Christ*mas; Jesus Christ wouldn't be born for another 8654 years. But it *was* a winter solstice, and Auteur wasn't about to limit himself to one cultural tradition.

* * *

Santa nodded thoughtfully.

He continued nodding.

Everyone in the room realised, with increasing panic, that Father Christmas himself didn't know how to save Christmas.

"Uh oh."

* * *

Auteur revelled in his victory. He was the Krampus, he was Ded Moroz, he was…who was that? A plump old fella dressed in green descended upon the shadow-dressed skeleton.

* * *

Mrs Mary Clause of Christmasland stared aghast at Mae, who had been the one to shove Santa into the Bridge.

"What? Surely if this Auteur fellow wanted to destroy Christmas, sending down its personification to him — I think it's safe to assume that Bridge leads immediately to an epicentre between Christmases — seemed only logical. If *anyone* could stop him, Father Christmas could."

They all stared at her, dumbfounded, and an aghast Lotto was the one to give voice to the concern on everyone's mind:

"You could have killed Santa! You *might still* have killed him!"

"Oh, *really*. Tossing Christmas personified into the Christmas wormhole, *that*'s going to destroy him, sure, makes sense."

Gabriel considered it for a moment — then she shrugged and relaxed.

"Mae's right —" she said at last, "conceptuals are stronger than that. And Santaforms *are* conceptuals, you know. She's right about that, too. He's not just a fictional character who came out of the book… he's an actual cosmic embodiment. Christmasland had its own existence even before Auteur interfered. I'm —" She blinked. "Well, I'm *almost* certain."

"I should hope so," Mary sniffed with more amusement than offence at the ancient being's shadow of uncertainty. "Speaking of, that all makes sense, but —"

Mary, with the tremendous strength she had used to carry the Bridge, picked up all three adventurers, and dropped them into the portal.

"— see if he's alive in there, won't you?" she bellowed, in a voice that brooked no argument, as they tumbled through a vortex-like flurry of ice and ribbons.

* * *

Auteur groaned, rattling his bones and causing his third heart to almost fall out of its ribcage — he only just caught it with his shadow.

"Damn," he said. "*Papa Noël* packs a hell of a right hook."

He was back Outside, no longer connected to any realm in particular — not quite in the Outer Void, but adrift once more into the Great Black Void that clung to the shores of reality, dotted with islands of Being.

He tried to reach out to *The Book of Christmas*, through that bond any writer of his calibre retained to their works — but the object on the other end of the connection was inert, a dead rectangle of cardboard, paper and ink. He had known as much even before he checked; he'd only written in enough magic for one day, and the design had been crude. What had started as an attempt to suborn the conceptual underpinnings of Christmasland had started to actualise many more tangential legends. There was more to Christmas, he realised now, than Santa Claus, or even that infant-god. His book had burnt itself out trying to actualise it all, and left him with nothing to show for it.

"Nuts."

Kicking at a patch of Void-dust, he released his possession on a certain innocent old man who lived in a hut at the edge of the universe. His operation had failed, and he did not believe in leaving loose ends behind. He did wish he knew how the *Book* had burnt itself out *quite* so fast. It was as though another tale had actualised without his notice. But only the desire of someone standing at the Crossroads of Christmas, at the very heart of the Claus-Rosen Bridge, could have commanded the power of the *Book*; so what…?… Who…?…

He swore again as he felt the currents pulling him towards another dimension altogether — and put that failure of a Christmas special out of his mind. Sod it. Time for something…

…new.

6.
Valhalla

It was peaceful. It was quiet. An empty mountainside with only the whistling wind for company. Some would call it lonely, but it was truly at peace. The only signs of life on this particular mountainside were two ravens, nestled together and watching over the landscape.

That well-maintained peace was shattered as three loud thuds shook the frozen ground in quick succession. The groans of pain caught the ravens' attention, as the trio slowly moved to get back up.

"I'll admit," Lotto said with a strained groan, "I've actually had worse falls than that."

"*How* have you had worse falls than that?!" Gabriel huffed, sitting herself up and cracking her spine back into the right shape.

Lotto waved his hand in response; it was a story for another time, and he was far too tired of stories at present, anyway. He reached for his cane, which was nudged closer to him by Mae, now in cat form. He could recognize the smug look in her eyes.

"Yes, yes, cats always land on their feet, you're very clever," he sighed.

Gabriel came over and helped him up as Mae returned to humanoid form. Now that they were all upright and in one piece, the trio looked around at the snowy expanse.

"Where are we?" Gabriel asked, "No Santa, no Scroogy skeleton man…"

"Clearly not," Mae replied. "We must've taken a wrong turn during our dimensional tumble."

"But how do we get back?" queried Gabriel.

"Honestly? I have no idea…" Lotto sighed, visibly worried. If they couldn't find a way back then that would, no doubt, cause even more problems for them than they already had to contend with. While Mae shrank down into a rabbit and hopped towards the ravens, he began looking around — they needed to find civilization, or at least somewhere to stay in the event that they were stuck.

"Gabriel," he started, "I'm sorry for the trouble you've gotten involved with. I imagine this has rather ruined your day, dragging you along like this."

She shook her head dismissively; she was following after Mae as she chased the ravens, but did not seem the least bit out of breath for it.

"Oh, *that*'s not true. It was my choice to follow you, none of this is your fault."

"Ah, th-thank you. I —"

"No," she continued, interrupting — "it's obviously all *her* fault!"

Mae looked aghast at Gabriel's claim, practically *popping* back into the young boy form. "Me? What did *I* do?!"

"Oh I don't know," Gabriel said with newfound confidence, "Maybe throwing Jolly Saint Nick into a massive space portal!"

"Hey! It worked, didn't it!"

"Did it? Worked to get his wife to toss us into the same wormhole, yeah! But did it defeat Auteur? Did it save Christmas? Maybe! Who knows! *We* certainly don't. Look around us, we have no idea!"

The two continued to squabble as Lotto found his attention drawn away. He'd finally spotted it — at the top of the mountain, where clouds seemed to part over the very peak, a large hall sat with music and partying distantly blaring. It looked Viking, at a guess, which drew his attention to the two ravens. He remembered little of his human life, that malleable clay that often lost parts of itself whenever he slept, but there was a book that stood prevalently in his

memory. A lightbulb shone in his mind. Today, he hoped, those stories would prove real — for the time being.

"Please be right," the child inside of him begged — "please be who I think you are."

He approached the two ravens, so familiar from the mythology books he read as an imaginative youth. He pointed at both and stated their names as fact:

"Hugin… Munin…" He cast his gaze downwards, muttering to himself: "Something like that, at least."

Then he looked up again. The ravens didn't speak — but they'd understood him, and they nodded slowly.

He hadn't smiled like this in a *long* time.

"Hugin, Munin," he started again, "my name is Lotto. They're my friends, those grumpy ones over there. Mae and Gabriel. We're lost, and, for the time being, need somewhere to stay for a short while. Only a day, no more. I'm aware that you two don't make the decisions here, but I think your master would be… most understanding of our plight, if you carried the message."

The ravens looked at each other in consideration, as if communicating between each other silently.

Lotto grew nervous and pleaded, "Please, I understand this must be difficult to explain but —"

He didn't get the chance to finish his sentence as the two ravens squawked loudly at him, before flying past his head. As he turned, hoping to make another defence, he found a new face to greet him. He was an older man with a scar where an eye should've been, the two ravens now sat upon his shoulder. He held his helmet under his arm, large golden wings coming off of it.

"I don't think there'll be a need for any more explanation," the man stated in a booming voice. It was enough to finally draw Mae and Gabriel's attention, witnessing the powerful man.

Lotto grew overjoyed, the smile returning to his face after his momentary surprise. He shook the Allfather's hand eagerly, matching strengths with him.

"It is an honour, sir, truly to be in your presence."

"Pah!" the Allfather spat. "No need for that! The last thing Valhalla needs is more posturing."

"Hardly! I grew up with tales of you and, even with my own life upturned, you stuck around. All of you did, every name. Every story."

Mae and Gabriel returned to Lotto's side, like his own pair of ravens. Mae was tempted to turn into one herself, but felt it might be seen as something of a mockery of the powerful figure in front of them.

* * *

The Allfather glared down at the trio, judging them silently. His single eye saw beyond their outer forms. Here stood three shapechangers, none of them the same as they were at their birth. He was almost reminded of some of his own kind — lesser, perhaps. More complicated. Fallible. These were, after all, people, however strange.

The altered man, the one who thought of himself as Lotto, had spoken truly; *he* was a story — real today, perhaps words on a page tomorrow. And Odin Allfather was wise enough to know it, and be at peace with it. These semi-mortals were transient; *he* was memory itself, a glacier to their rivers — eternal in the retelling.

And yet, their inferiority was all the more reason to be a gracious host.

His judging glare broke down, avalanche-like, into a welcoming smile.

"One day," he said with a smirk, "That's all you'll need. You're in luck, we just started the next hour of celebrations."

* * *

The hall was extravagant, well worth the climb it took to reach it.

It was, of course, *crowded*. So many fallen soldiers — not to mention those lucky enough to simply take the favour of a god — and they all found themselves celebrating and partying in these hallowed halls, whether it be through bouts or through feasts. As the three had arrived at the gates and filed into the great halls, Gabriel made the wise decision to stand away from the spars and duels of Vahalla — which looked rather more like chaotic bar fights than anything else.

Gabriel had chosen to sit herself by one of the tables, where she was quickly handed a full mug of some concerningly stench-ridden alcohol. Before long, she found herself surrounded by dead men with a similar odour — yet they cheered gleefully as they shared stories of their conquests and battles, with a healthy dose of exaggerated triumph. The company of the dead was almost welcoming, she realised, as she settled herself amongst her fellow storytellers.

She gazed out at the new friends she'd made in that Library. She'd have to go back; she was aware this excitement couldn't last much longer. This Valhalla was one last story, a bit of magic from the book; soon it would dissipate. Such wonders could not exist in the world wrought by the Lightbringers, not all the time. She knew that better than most.

But watching their adventures for even a day — it had made her feel like her world had opened up again. Gabriel was learning a lot about Mae by watching her chosen form of entertainment, as she eagerly got involved with the bar fight taking place. For someone so prone to manifesting as a literal rabbit, she was brimming with courage, and a remarkable fighter even against the men of Valhalla. Gabriel could've mistaken her for a soldier, with how calm yet excitable she was getting against these men, sending some of them into the air with immense strength and smashing tables beneath them.

Yet she *was* a rabbit, more than she was any other animal; the more she stared, the more certain Gabriel became that Mae had been that before anything else. It was the little things, the details in the spectacle of her brawls — like the little

rabbit ears threatening to erupt from her head or the way her foot excitedly tapped against the ground when she held the moment. She could see why Lotto found her so cute.

Speaking of Lotto, he appeared almost like a whole new man. He danced with a newfound joy alongside the other Vikings, making merry with the Aesir as he insisted on having a full conversation with some of his childhood heroes. His joy was not unfounded, as he found himself able to freely walk without his cane for the first time in months. Spending a day like this with your idol, a *full* day as promised by the Allfather — it was awakening parts of him he'd thought lost forever. Not the facts of his old life, but the feelings, the wonders of his real childhood, long before the Archons and their Academy. He could feel the memories of who he was bubbling to the surface and, for once, his body not fighting them.

If only he could stay. But he knew that wouldn't last.

Today, though, that didn't matter. Today, amongst loving company, he'd enjoy himself. Let the snow melt tomorrow, if it must; he would have a jolly good bit of fun with it, first.

* * *

As Lotto continued to shamelessly dance and cheer along with the Vikings, Mae made herself comfortable next to Gabriel. She had to take a long breath before she spoke; her humanoid form was covered with bruises, which vanished as she exhaled.

"I have to admit —" she said as she nursed both a headache and a cup brimming with some kind of mead, "your ability to transform might be even better than mine. You'd just click yourself back to health, wouldn't you? I actually have to concentrate. You're better."

Gabriel gave a soft chuckle, smiling to Mae. "That's very sweet of you to say."

"I'm in a sweet mood. Not my usual, but it's growing on me."

"Your jolly friend must be rubbing off on you," Gabriel joked.

She was comfortable enough to joke around them, she realised. *That* was certainly new. New, but not unwelcome. She didn't see the sly smile that was painted across Mae's face, as an idea bubbled up to the surface.

"Gabriel, can you answer a question for me?"

"Of course!"

"Name a place in the universe that's relaxing."

"Oh… Are you going?" She had just gotten comfortable with the strange pair, why were they going already? Was it something that she'd done?

"Lotto and I need a break after this, I just thought you'd have the best ideas. You must have read about somewhere you liked in this Library, no?"

Gabriel felt reluctant to answer the question, but she refused to be rude to her new friends. Proper friends.

"Well," she hummed in thought. "There's one planet I've seen in a few books. It's a three-tiered planet, with these floating islands and living songs. It's truly beautiful, I must have read about the planet and its culture a dozen times already. It's called Kraij."

"Kraij. Got it," Mae nodded — then turned away from Gabriel. "Lotto!!" she called out, catching his attention as he spun around in a dance.

The older man whirled around and stopped himself by the table, his face lit by a dizzy, joyous smile plain as day. "You know, my leg hasn't felt this good in months! We should come to Valhalla more often!"

"As tempting as that is, I think we have a new place to visit. Gabriel just suggested it, a planet with living songs."

"Living songs? My word! Well, I do love music —" He grinned as his partner pulled him back into the dance. "— why, you should see me with a

saxophone!… Well, gentle now, Ragnar — my friends and I must leave soon. — Oh, very well, one last dance…"

Before another word could be said, he was sent spinning back into the heart of the party.

"I'm going to miss you both," Gabriel quietly said as Mae started to stand.

She couldn't let them go without telling them just how much they'd helped her — even for a day — how good they'd made her feel, for the first time in far too long a time. She hadn't had an adventure like this in a long long while — she couldn't be more grateful for the day they'd given her. But how could she say it without sounding like a fool? Especially to Mae — blunt, confident Mae, who always said what she meant without a hint of shame, even when she had no voice to say it with.

Mae gave a little chuckle.

"Well, we could always come back. Lotto wants to learn more about the universe, after all." She picked up her drink with a little sigh, "It's a shame though. A three-tiered planet must be quite hard to navigate."

Mae leaned over the table, her eyes locked with Gabriel's. Those soul-piercing eyes. And yet, this time, they felt warm. Inviting.

"I wonder where we could find a suitable guide."

With a wink and a smirk, Mae turned and joined Lotto in their dancing. She didn't wait to hear the shocked sound from Gabriel as the realisation dawned upon her.